

Soviet A-Plane

By '60 Forecast

By John G. Norris
Staff Reporter

Congressional atomic experts predicted yesterday that the Soviet Union will have a nuclear-powered airplane flying within a year and score another big propaganda victory over the United States.

Chairman Melvin Price (D-Ill.) of the subcommittee on research of the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy made the forecast after officials of the Atomic Energy Commission, Central Intelligence Agency and Pentagon gave his group a secret briefing on what is known of Russian progress in this field. He and other members said they doubted that the Soviets already have an atomic plane flying, as reported last month by the magazine Aviation Week.

"There is no real proof that such a plane actually is flying," said Price. "And they certainly would announce such a feat if they had accomplished it. For the scientific prestige to be gained by the nation that first flies a nuclear-powered airplane will be great."

Statements Supported

The Illinois Representative's statement that the Soviets probably are not yet in the air with such a plane backed up earlier statements by President Eisenhower and others in the Administration that there is no real evidence of its existence. But Price expressed strong belief that the Russians are well advanced on a high-priority and well financed A-plane program and probably will fly it this year. At the same time, he was sharply critical of United States escorts in the field. Noting that this Government has not even set target dates for ground and flight tests, Price said that at the present rate of progress, it will be four or five years before the Pentagon project reaches the flying stage.

It seems probable that estimates that the Soviets are close to flying an atomic plane are based largely on Moscow pronouncements, and indications from Russian publications that they have been hard at work on the project for several years. Twice in recent months there have been Russian declarations that they will fly an atomic-powered "civilian transport plane" in 1959. Such boasts usually have been carried out.

Believed Subsonic Craft

Price said he believed the plane the Russians are close to flying is a subsonic aircraft of a type that Pentagon experts say this country might well have flying now if a decision had been made to go ahead with such a project. But

for some years now, top Government policy has been not to actually build a nuclear plane until it is possible to turn out a fast, effective military aircraft.

Critics of this policy call it "penny-pinching". While admitting that development of a subsonic plane would be costly, they contend it would be a long step toward a later, militarily-capable warplane and save money in the long run. They also stress the cold-war psychological impact of the Russians' gaining another such "first."

Definite military requirements have been laid down by both the Air Force and Navy for developing a subsonic nuclear plane, without waiting for a supersonic A-bomber. Formal establishment of such a requirement is a prerequisite to seeking funds for development of any weapon.

The Air Force feels that an airplane that could fly almost indefinitely without refueling would be useful as an early warning radar craft or for launching missiles from points outside the range of enemy fighters and defensive missiles. The Navy would like a similar plane for patrol work.

Backed by Evidence

Price's forecast that the Russian A-plane under development probably will be subsonic initially, is partially born out by other evidence. Air Force sources report that lengthy aerodynamic studies have been made of drawings and possibly photographs of a Russian airplane of unusual design that has been seen flying two or three times.

The configuration is very like the drawings of a purported Russian atomic plane published in the Dec. 1 issue of Aviation Week and reprinted in this and many other newspapers the same day.

But the Air Force studies have come to the conclusion that such an aircraft—if atomic powered—almost certainly would have to be a flying test vehicle for a subsonic plane—not a supersonic bomber—as reported. The Air Force experts also suggest that it might be a "chemical bomber" such as the B-70 under development in this country, capable of spurts of supersonic speed.

The estimate that it might be an experimental version of an atomic subsonic plane squares with the Russians' New Year's declaration that they would fly a "civilian transport" this year. For the Soviets like to bill all of their scientific achievements as "civilian" and "peaceful," even though not many passengers would desire to fly in the first versions of an atomic airplane.